



## Race and politics in the Cappuccino City, by Derek S. Hyra

Talja Blokland

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## BOOK REVIEW



***Race and politics in the Cappuccino City***, by Derek S. Hyra, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 2017

Cappuccino is an upgraded version of “regular” coffee with milk. In *Race, Class and Politics in the Cappuccino City*, Derek Hyra sees gentrification as a metaphor for the consequences of gentrification in Washington, DC. The mushrooming of coffee shops is one gentrification sign. Such shops are an important indicator of the urban lifestyle of those who turn to them in globally connected workspaces. In Berlin, these tend to be poor, educated non-German Europeans with creative start-ups without money for a co-working space. But this is not the case in America, so let’s stay in the United States, because that is where Hyra’s theses apply best. This is one of the biases of the book. Hyra states that the book “contributes” (p. 19) to existing understanding of urban and community change as it “demonstrates that neighborhood change and inner-city economic development are related to global, national and local dynamics” (p. 19) and how these occur. I think he forgot to say “in some parts of the world.”

Because Washington, DC, has for decades been dominated demographically and politically by African Americans, many academics and policymakers have referred to Washington as Chocolate City. The white foam is the new White middle class. This suggests that Whites add so little to the essence (espresso is, after all, *not* just coffee but something way off from the “Americano” that Americans have long thought of as coffee, consumed in mugs of sizes long unavailable in Europe and, when cold, is heated up in the microwave). It suggests that Whites are like steamed milk. Such coffee has a foamy, smooth texture. If you let it sit for a while, it is just milk that by then has basically spoiled the espresso. Rich and creamy but bad for you. I disagree that a cappuccino is “nothing more than a refined, refurbished regular cup of coffee with milk” (p. 148). The coffee with milk American style is a weak version of coffee, not the other way around. There is something that feels not quite right about comparing low-income Black working-class communities with coffee and the White influx with steamed milk.

The metaphor could be an easy way for yet another gentrification study to engage in middle class bashing and surely one that some gentrification scholars may like. But that is not at all what this book does. The metaphor is unfortunate because it risks essentializing categories through a metaphor. That is too bad, because the book is actually a very subtle, empirically profound study, lightly written in a vivid style that makes very important contributions to theories of urban development and the models used so far. It provides thought-provoking insights into the limitations and possibilities of social mix in neighborhoods and develops an urban theory that does not prioritize one dynamic (e.g., a global city, a neoliberal city, a dual city) but instead provides insights into aspects of all. In particular, it argues that race remains a supplement to other categories, that consumer explanations include a search for authenticity that is linked to (stereotyped) Black culture, and that in other ways, too, standard urban theoretical explanations need revision to fully explain neighborhood gentrification in a former Black ghetto.

Hyra sets out to describe how a Washington, DC, ghetto became a “gilded ghetto,” a term “to indicate the intricate social and economic redevelopment processes, and outcomes, associated with the twenty-first century transformation of second ghettos” (p. 6) or the ghettos from the 1960s to the 1990s when “socially walled off, impoverished inner city Black spaces” emerged (p. 6). His aim is to analyze the making of this gilded ghetto in a comprehensive way on various levels: not by taking a position in the either/or of production versus consumption approaches that he rightly argues have not resulted in very useful academic analyses of gentrification but by examining his case and looking at it from both the production and the consumption sides of the argument.

The first two chapters provide detailed analyses of the changing politics of Washington, DC (Chapter 3), and of DC’s economy (Chapter 4), including the ways in which “Black branding” played a role in the upgrading of Shaw/U street, the neighborhood where Hyra conducted his ethnography. The relationship

between race and gentrification is a complex and multilayered one, and Hyra highlights this in brilliant detail. Although Hyra does not quite answer the question he had said he would address of *what* attracts White residents to historic Black low-income neighborhoods, one of his theses derived from his ethnography is that some Whites appreciate “living the wire” (in contrast David Harding’s wonderful *Living the Drama*). In a lovely vignette, Ron, an African American liquor store owner, expresses his dismay over a White customer who looked for 40-oz. bottles of malt liquor and lottery tickets for a “hood party.” This episode highlights the fact that Whites visiting or living in a gilded ghetto appreciate Black life either stereotypically, as in this example, or selectively, as in historic preservation efforts.

Hyra asserts that some White residents talk about crime and violence as if it makes them sound cool at parties. However, I wondered: why do some Whites talk this way and others do not? Violence occurs occasionally and, unfortunately, residents, regardless of race, need to learn how to adapt to it. The book raises but does not answer the following questions: Is the desire to live the wire a unique feature of gentrifying neighborhoods or did it exist during earlier periods? If it is a new feature, why now?

One of Hyra’s other questions is why, notwithstanding proximity between various groups of residents, lifestyle segregation occurs (i.e., between cosmopolitan Whites and working-class Blacks; chapters 5 and 6). Whites and Blacks may live side by side, but they don’t interact and, as a result, these areas lack cohesion. I found the sections dealing with ongoing segregation quite thought-provoking, but the best parts of these chapters are the ethnographic accounts of change. This includes the Black church in conflict with the gay club with the schoolyard/church parking lot turning into a dog park and a Black hair salon being displaced. Hyra’s argument is complex, multilayered, and in sharp contrast to previous work by authors who have their minds made up before they even start their research.

In the last chapter, Hyra thinks through what this study means for future “equitable communities” (p. 155). This shows again how Hyra is not only careful but also cares. Yet it leaves us with much to do. If the way to political and economic justice is “bringing together people for shared activities,” (p. 168) then we may fall short. I would love to see a deeper exploration of forms of social networking across race and class that come about on the basis of unorganized durable engagements in institutions. For example, would it be possible to achieve social mixing and social interaction via day care, community gardens, and the local public schools—an approach made difficult in the United States because of the lack of provision of publicly funded day care and the desire of middle-class parents, regardless of race, to send their children to high-quality schools? The plea for community organizations to promote social mixing reminds me of a long-term Dutch resident whom I interviewed about integrative efforts of community organizers in her area, one that has experienced Moroccan immigration since the 1960s: “I am eating couscous for 20 years now. Still don’t like it.” Maybe the tolerance of differences (e.g., brief encounters sitting near one other but not at the same table) are as good as diversity will get. Perhaps politicians, planners, and activists need to set more realistic expectations.

The book asks difficult questions but provides no easy answers. Consequently, it is a must-read for anyone interested in gentrification, social mixing, diversity, and equity. It should provoke self-questioning and, it is hoped, also much discussion on both sides of the Atlantic.

Talja Blokland  
Humboldt University

✉ talja.blokland@sowi.hu-berlin.de

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